

CUSTOMER SERVICE, FACT OR FICTION

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The topic of whether customer service is essential for fire department operations was identified for research. The purpose of the research was to analyze the meaning of quality customer service, and determine if customer service is essential for the fire service.

A descriptive research methodology was utilized to answer the following questions:

1. Is customer service essential in today's fire service?
2. What are the most popular methods utilized to measure customer satisfaction?
3. Are fire service organizations experiencing changes in the way they are perceived by and interact with customers?

The procedures used to complete this research included a literature review of various fire service publications, as well as literature from several service oriented industries, concerning how to improve customer service.

Findings of the research indicate that the ability to maintain effective customer relations within the community is very important to the future of the fire service. Fire administrators must begin to refocus their thinking as to what services they will provide in the future. In order to effectively make this change it will be necessary to ascertain what services the customer wants and measure their satisfaction with said services.

Recommendations were made to guide Palm Beach County Fire Rescue (PBCFR) in the development of a marketing plan and a survey to measure satisfaction with the services provided by the Inspections section of the Bureau of Safety Services.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, fire departments were viewed by citizens as a vital public safety element in the community. Subsequently, very rarely were departments questioned about their budget requests (Coleman, 1990).

Recently, Palm Beach County Fire Rescue, like fire departments everywhere, is experiencing fiscal constraints and is being forced to provide more services with less dollars, while still attempting to deliver excellent customer service.

In addition to fiscal constraints, fire departments are facing increased competition from other municipal departments, schools, and private corporations (Coleman, 1990). If a fire department is to survive in these extremely tumultuous times, they must commit to improving public relations and develop a mechanism to measure their success (Coleman, 1995).

The problem that prompted this research project was that Palm Beach County Fire Rescue Department's Inspections section did not know whether customer service was essential for its survival. Further, there were no instruments in place with which to measure customer satisfaction of the services provided.

The purpose of this research was to determine if customer service is essential in today's fire service and to aid in the development of an instrument to measure said services.

This project employed a descriptive research methodology to answer the following questions:

1. Is customer service essential in today's fire service?
2. What are the most popular methods utilized to measure customer satisfaction?
3. Are fire service organizations experiencing changes in the way they are perceived by and interact with customers?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Palm Beach County Fire Rescue (PBCFR) is a government agency located in Palm Beach County, Florida. The department was created through the consolidation of ten independent fire districts, by state law, in 1984 for the purpose of providing a variety of services related to protecting the lives and property of the citizens living in the unincorporated and select municipal areas of Palm Beach County. The department provides services to approximately 660 square miles, and protects in excess of 650,000 residents and visitors.

The organizational structure of Palm Beach County Fire Rescue incorporates three layers of management. The Fire Rescue Administrator oversees the departments goals and plans for future needs. Assisting the administrator are three Deputy Chiefs, who administer individual divisions such as the Bureau of Safety Services (which is responsible for all fire

prevention activities), Support Services (responsible for all vehicle and station maintenance), and Operations (responsible for mitigating emergency situations). Middle management consists of Battalion Chiefs, Administrative Chiefs, and District Chiefs, who execute the objectives on a battalion, section, and shift level. The frontline personnel, (the firefighters, paramedics, dispatchers, fire inspectors and investigators), are responsible for providing specialized public safety jobs to the community on a daily basis.

The majority of Palm Beach County Fire Rescue's interaction with the community is conducted by the approximately 750 line personnel who perform their duties everyday throughout the county's jurisdiction. Due to rapid growth and the subsequent increased demand for fire rescue services throughout the 1980's, which increased job security and enhanced benefit packages, fire rescue professionals began to think of themselves as someone the public needs, rather than as someone who serves the public. Subsequently, many fire rescue personnel do not view the citizen as a customer, yet a customer is someone who seeks out and uses a service or a product, much like the citizen who calls upon the fire department to provide a variety of emergency services.

As in private industry, emergency service organizations are also dependent upon customer (taxpayer) loyalty. The public is demanding that emergency services be accountable for the precious tax dollars that compete with other basic needs such as education and law enforcement (Coleman, 1995). As professionals, fire rescue personnel

should strive to offer the best quality service to the community (customer) because it is their responsibility. If the services that Palm Beach County Fire Rescue offers do not meet the public's expectations, they may be replaced.

This research project was completed according to the applied research requirements of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. The problem addressed by this research project related specifically to the service quality and marketing units of the Executive Development course. This unit of instruction stressed the importance of developing effective customer relations within public sector organizations in order to improve service quality and build citizen support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) of the National Emergency Training Center at Emmitsburg, Maryland, and at the library of Palm Beach Atlantic College in West Palm Beach, Florida. The purpose of the research was to evaluate existing data on the subject of customer service and how it relates to the fire service. The literature review involved a search of various fire service publications as well as literature from several service oriented industries, on how to improve customer service.

The literature review provided the researcher with information about customer

service and how it can affect the delivery of fire rescue and emergency services. The areas addressed were:

1. Is customer service essential in today's fire service?
2. What are the most popular methods utilized to measure customer satisfaction?
3. Are fire service organizations experiencing changes in the way they are perceived by and interact with customers?

Quality customer service reflects an organization operating at a high level of concern about and attention to the needs of the customer (Albrecht & Zemke, 1985). Service organizations throughout the world are experiencing changes in the way they are perceived by and interact with customers. Albrecht and Zemke (1985) maintain that the capacity to serve customers effectively and efficiently is an issue every organization must face, whether private or public. Organizations cannot ignore this new standard, of being held accountable for customer satisfaction, that is used by customers to measure the performance of their organization.

The identification of potential and existing customers is the first step in developing a customer-service strategy (Blanding, 1991). Most organizations are so busy, so uncomfortable, or so disinterested in people that they never take the time to find out who their customers are and what they might want and or need. Organizations can increase their

effectiveness by going through the process of defining who its customers are and finding out what the customer expects from the organization providing the products or services.

Customers are defined as either internal customers or external customers (Hinton, 1991). Internal customers are the people who perform the duties of serving the organization's external customers and rely on the organization for service from within; i.e., vehicle maintenance, etc. The external customers are the people who directly use the organization's services and, thus, generate revenue for the organization or provide funding through their tax payments.

Blanding (1991) explained that the customer is always an individual. Although a community may be a composite of many individuals, organizations always deal with those individuals one-on-one. Each of these individuals have personal basic needs that must be met.

Organizations must learn exactly what their customers expect from them (Berry, 1991). Unless an organization knows what its customers consider important, the organization will not be able to determine what changes are necessary to meet the desired expectations. Varied expectations are generated from both internal customers and external customers.

Pollen (1991) and Brandewie (1996) believe that customer service needs to be

woven as a common thread throughout the entire organization, creating a service culture.

Unless each employee perceives his or her own connection to expert service, the customer will not be properly served.

Albrecht and Zemke (1985) claim that unless the shared values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies of the organization--the organization's culture--are clearly and consciously focused on serving the customer, there is virtually no chance that the organization will be able to deliver a consistent quality of service and develop a reputation for quality service. This service culture philosophy must be communicated to the employees by the organization's leadership and it must be communicated in a way that the employees fully grasp, on a personal level, the importance of a customer relations strategy to the overall effectiveness of the organization and their continued survival and success (Hinton, 1991).

Stewart (1990) explained that once an organization becomes a dominant force in the local market it is at a risk of developing arrogance. This is sometimes reflected when personnel begin telling their customers what they want, as opposed to listening to what their customer's believe or feel they need.

Zemke (1989) believes that superior service quality is only there if the customer says so. He says what is more important, the only reliable measurement of service quality, is the assessment of the customers' most recent experience with the organization and their level of satisfaction with that experience.

PROCEDURES

This research project was initiated through a computer search at the LRC in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Additional information was obtained from the library of Palm Beach Atlantic College in West Palm Beach, Florida. A descriptive research was conducted of books and articles concerning customer satisfaction and quality expectations. The procedures used to complete this research included a literature review and the development of a survey instrument to measure customer satisfaction with the fire safety inspection process at Palm Beach County Fire Rescue.

RESULTS

During the research it was discovered that today's taxpayers are more sophisticated and educated than ever before. Customer service has increasingly become one of the most important functions that needs to be addressed in today's fire rescue departments. As taxpayers, citizens see themselves as consumers who are paying for more than a mere product, they believe they are buying services from their fire rescue department. Subsequently, customer service is an essential element each fire department administrator must be concerned about.

Through descriptive research the following questions were answered:

1. Is customer service essential in today's fire service?

Customer service is more crucial today than in years past. Citizens are more educated and society is moving forward faster than ever before. As a result, citizens are demanding more services with increased quality. Increased competition for market share by private providers has made enhancement of customer service essential for survival in today's fire service.

In his Executive Fire Officer research paper, Joseph Thomas recommended that organizations conduct a performance audit to examine their own organization in terms of growth, production, quality, level of service and customer satisfaction. Customer service feedback is vital to an organization that wishes to measure how well it is doing. President George Bush in a 1993 statement regarding the Malcolm Baldrige Award said, "In business, there is only one definition of quality - the customers definition." This admonition has just as much validity and significance for the public sector as it does for the private sector. "Clearly quality and product satisfaction in the public service area translates to taxpayer loyalty, loyalty that will prove beneficial at budget time." (Sims, 1993). In his Creating A Government That Works Better and Costs Less; Improving Customer Service report, Vice President Al Gore states, "The overall quality of service provided by government is below what the public expects and has a right to expect." Business on the other hand is dependent on customer satisfaction and therefore has, during the past 15 years, placed tremendous emphasis on customer comments. Vice President Gore also states that "Customer and employee input provides a solid basis for setting performance standards

for customer service” and reminds us that “what gets measured gets done.” If the fire service intends to be truly responsive to the needs of the public, its customers, then it must first clearly establish what those needs are. The failure to implement a customer service feedback program means we, as fire service professionals, are merely imposing our judgements upon the public as to what they need.

2. What are the most popular methods utilized to measure customer satisfaction?

There are a variety of data-collection techniques which can be utilized to measure customer satisfaction. The most common techniques utilized are:

- a) Questionnaires and Surveys
- b) Interviews
- c) Focus Groups
- d) Customer Report Cards
- e) Service Standard of Performance (SOP)
- f) Customer satisfaction bench marking, and
- g) Attribute ratings and perceptual maps.

(Albrecht, 1989; Blanding, 1991; Gerson, 1993; Hanan & Karp, 1989; Zemke, 1989). The survey method is the most common data collection technique utilized to measure customer satisfaction (Gerson, 1993; Hanan & Karp, 1989; Zemke, 1989). Surveys can either be

written or oral questionnaires, telephone or face-to-face interviews, or focus groups.

Surveys usually consist of several questions or statements along with associated responses that require people to answer according to some predefined scale. Some surveys allow people to answer in open minded manner, thereby describing their responses in greater detail. Gerson (1993) says that surveys are typically self support mechanisms where the customer answers the questions for themselves. Further, he explains that the idea is to get the customer to provide the most accurate answers to the organizations questions so that service, quality, customer service efforts and levels of customer satisfaction can be evaluated.

There are a variety of tools for measuring quality and customer service satisfaction, and many of those are used interchangeably (Gerson, 1995). Some of the tools used to measure quality and satisfaction include idea-generators such as brainstorming, force field analysis or flow charting, or the use of actual statistical tools such as check sheets, histograms, Pareto diagrams, scatter diagrams, control charts or stratifications. All of these tools have one thing in common, that being that they are essentially internal measurement techniques.

Although these tools are important and do give a clear picture of how well a company is providing a quality product or service, quality is really only what the customer defines it to be (Gerson, 1993). Sometimes a customer may not be able to describe what

quality is, but they may know it when they see it. Therefore, internal quality measurement must be considered in the proper perspective. That is, a service can meet all of the internal requirements and still not perform the way that best meets the customers needs.

Gerson (1993) explains that because some measurements of quality are internal to an organization, satisfaction levels must be measured by the customer. He maintains that this can be done through a variety of data-collection techniques.

There are many formats and layouts that can be used for structuring surveys. Gerson (1993) believes that the key to the most effective surveys are to keep them “user friendly,” meaning easy to understand and respond to. Also, he stresses that a survey should not be so long that people begin to lose interest.

Regardless of what type of survey is chosen, in order for customer service to be effective it must be woven as a common link through the entire organization, thereby creating a service culture.

Unless each employee perceives his or her own connection to expert service the customer will not properly be served (Pollen, 1991). Old patterns of behavior will have to be changed, new values will need to emerge, and a different plan which focuses on the consumers needs will need to be implemented (Burkart, 1997).

3. Are fire service organizations experiencing changes in the way they are perceived by and interact with customers?

The following is an excerpt from Albrecht and Zemke's *Service America* (1985). Service is now the business of business in America. The capacity to serve customers effectively and efficiently is an issue every organization must face. No one can evade this challenge; manufacturers and traditional service providers, profit-making and non-profit organizations, and private and public enterprises must all face the task of responding effectively and efficiently to customers and consumers who expect quality and service as a part of every transaction. Some organizations are well aware of this need and have responded to it. For others, the need to be customer-focused and service-preoccupied comes as a rude surprise. But it can not be ignored; it is not a momentary fad that will suddenly go away. It is the new standard used by customers and consumers to measure organization performance. Increasingly, the marketplace is opting to do business with those who service, and reducing involvement with those who merely supply.

Quality service is more than just catchy phrases or some new program. It involves high level technical service delivery coupled with a definite way of handling the delivery of that service in a humanistic manner (Brunacini, 1996).

Quality customer service is the set of activities or operations performed in an

organization through which employee's interact with the consumer to ensure their satisfaction with the organizations operations and service. Hinton (1991) and Stewart (1990) explain that quality customer service involves a variety of events.

First, there must be interaction with the customer involving active listening to understand what their needs or wants are. Second, the employees must adhere to the procedures and policies of the organization. Third, the employees must project a positive attitude and use good customer service skills. And finally, if there is a problem, the organization must solve it or provide resourceful assistance.

Interaction with a customer involves interpersonal communication. This is the type, quality or kind of contact that occurs when each person involved talks and listens in ways that highlight the individual's and the other person's humanness (Stewart, 1990).

According to Hinton (1991), research indicates that the overwhelming reason why organizations fail at customer relations is due to their inability to communicate clearly with their employees and customers. In service businesses of every size and description, the priority today is to continuously listen to customers. This listening concept involves understanding what they are saying as it applies to the business of serving them, and then responding creatively to what the customer reveals to you (Zemke, 1989).

Fire rescue organizations are dependent upon taxpayer support. The public

demands that emergency services be accountable for the precious tax and fund raising dollars that compete with other basic needs such as education, law enforcement and housing. If the service that is offered does not meet the public's expectations it can and will be replaced by other sources (Eastham & Walz, 1992; Templeton, 1996).

In addition to thinking about the external customers of a service organization, the internal customers of the organization must be addressed. Research conducted by University of Maryland professor Benjamin Schneider (Zemke, 1989) shows the impact of management practices on employee performance and customer satisfaction with the way employees they are managed, is significantly related to the customer's satisfaction with the service they have received from the organization. From this study, Schneider found that when employee's are satisfied with the way they are treated, with the availability of the right tools to do the job, and with management's support for delivering quality service, customers are more likely to be satisfied with the quality of treatment they receive from those employee's. One of the best ways for leaders and managers to foster a successful customer service program is to promote positive customer service within the organization first (Halas, 1996).

DISCUSSION

Fire service organizations are coming to realize that today, more than ever before, customer service is essential for their survival. Fire departments everywhere are being

required to do more with less because of the economic and political climate in the communities in which they serve.

For fire departments to remain effective while providing this greater breadth of service, they must first understand who the customer is. The view that only the person who has been involved in a disaster, an accident, or suffered from a fire is the customer is no longer valid. Each organization has a virtual laundry list of potential customers. These customers could be anyone who has received a service from the organization. They could also be the families, friends and acquaintances of those individuals. Additionally, an organization also has internal customers who depend on the organization for service and are able to mold the perception people may have about the organization.

Once an organization identifies their customers, they can begin to understand if the customer is satisfied with the services they are receiving or if they would like varied or additional services.

Top notch fire departments are the ones that will be pro-active in responding to those desires. An important point to remember is that not only will additional services need to be provided, the quality of those services must remain in the forefront. It is apparent that today's customers will accept nothing less.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors research revealed that fire service organizations today are realizing that it is becoming more difficult to obtain the necessary funds to provide quality service.

Moreover, it is imperative that the fire service realizes that if the private sector learns that a potential market exists due to lack of, or poorly delivered service, significant competition awaits just around the corner. Palm Beach County Fire Rescue's Inspection section can improve their operation by studying how successful organizations operate and provide quality customer service.

Developing a marketing plan for Palm Beach County Fire Rescue that will deliver tangible results can be accomplished using a four-step approach. The steps are to focus on the customer through research (by utilizing the attached survey in Appendix A), to focus on the future by setting goals (listening to what the customer says), to focus on the present by analyzing the situation, and to focus on the process through implementation (providing the services the customer wants). As the world and economy continue to change, quality service and customer satisfaction will continue to be at the forefront of survival for our organization.

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APPENDIX A

DATE

KEYBOARD(busaddress)

RE: ANNUAL INSPECTION

Dear Sir/Madam:

Recently, Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue performed a Fire Safety Inspection at your facility.

We would like to request that you complete the enclosed survey to assist us in providing better quality service. Any additional comments you may have with regard to the survey would also be greatly appreciated.

Please return this survey and any comments in the enclosed, self addressed, stamped envelope. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments please call me in West Palm Beach at (561) 233-0004 or from the South County at (561) 278-9970, extension 353.

Thank you for your assistance with this very important matter. Your continued support and cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Al Sierra, Administrative Chief
Bureau of Safety Services - Inspections Division

AS/ab

Enclosure

STOP



Palm Beach County Fire Rescue
Bureau of Safety Services
Inspections Division

Customer Survey

Was this your first experience with the Fire Safety Inspection program from Palm Beach County Fire Rescue?

Yes

or

No

Please answer the following questions by circling the answer you feel best describes your feeling about our service.

VS - Very Satisfied

S - Satisfied

U - Undecided

D - Dissatisfied

VS - Very Dissatisfied

Was the Inspector courteous and did the Inspector seem knowledgeable in his/her explanation of the Palm Beach County Fire Code?

Yes

or

No

Did the Inspector offer assistance (instructions) regarding any corrections that may have been necessary?

Yes

or

No

If so, do you feel the instructions were advantageous?

Yes

or

No

Were you pleased with the overall way your Inspection was handled?

Yes

or

No

Were you satisfied with the timeliness of your Fire Safety Inspection?

Yes

or

No

The Fire-Rescue Inspector identified him/herself and thoroughly explained their procedures and what was required of me.

VS

S

U

D

VD

The Fire-Rescue Inspector presented him/herself in a professional manner was organized, thorough, and maintained a good rapport throughout the inspection process.

VS

S

U

D

VD

The Fire-Rescue Inspector treated me and other present personnel with respect.

VS

S

U

D

VD

I felt that the Inspection process improved the overall safety of my establishment.

VS

S

U

D

VD

I felt satisfied with the overall service that I received from Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue.

VS

S

U

D

VD

Please return this survey in the enclosed, self addressed, stamped envelope. Please feel free to express any additional comments in the space provided below.

File No. **KEYBOARD**(file #) - Inspector **KEYBOARD**(inspector #)

STOP